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### Culloden

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Title: *Culloden*

Country of Origin: UK

Year: 1964

Language: English, Scottish Gaelic

Production Company: British Broadcasting Corporation

Filming Locations: Inverness, Culloden Moor

Director: Peter Watkins

Producer: Peter Watkins

Screenwriter: Peter Watkins

Cinematographer: Dick Bush

Production Designers: Anne Davey, Colin MacLeod, Brendon Woods

Editor: Michael Bradsell

Runtime: 69 minutes

Cast (Starring): Olivier Espitalier-Noel, George McBean, Robert Oates

**Synopsis:** Wednesday April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1746: somehow, a modern television news crew is on hand to confront viewers with, in the words of *Culloden*'s opening credits, "an account of one of the most mishandled and brutal battles ever fought in Britain." Immediately before and after they engage in bloody combat, soldiers and commanders on both sides (Jacobite, Hanoverian) at the Battle of Culloden explain, through a series of talking head-style interviews, both many of the social and political causes that sparked the last civil war ever fought on British soil *and* many of the logistical reasons why that conflict ended in such a resounding defeat for the Jacobite forces commanded by Prince Charles Edward Stuart (popularly known as Bonnie Prince Charlie). After documenting the one-sided carnage of the titular battle itself, *Culloden* proceeds to put on record what the film's unseen journalist narrator terms "the worst atrocities in the history of the British Army." The murderous 'pacification' of the Scottish Highlands after the final routing of Prince Charles's troops is presented as an extended and deliberate act of state-sponsored genocide, in which English and Lowland Scottish societies "destroyed a race of people" in the Scottish Gaeltacht (i.e., Gaelic-speaking region) in order to cement the free mercantile and imperialist unitary British political project and identity associated with the 1707 Act of Union between the English and Scottish parliaments.

**Critique:** *Culloden* is a film predicated upon two central, and quite deliberately engineered, paradoxes. Firstly, writer/director Peter Watkins's celebrated 1964 docudrama mixes painstaking

historical accuracy (at times, charting the Battle of Culloden's progress on a minute-by-minute basis) with glaring anachronism (the structuring conceit that TV cameras were present to record an event that unfolded some two centuries before the birth of television). Secondly, the film strives to turn its forensic anatomisation of the grisly end of one historically and culturally specific military conflict into a less time-bound parable that underscores the futility and hypocrisy of all wars. The result is a work that systematically demythologises one of the most deliriously romanticised events in the entire course of Scottish history. As well as being a formally and thematically accomplished work in its own right, *Culloden* acts as a suggestive counterpoint to the traditional conflation of Jacobitism and a noble, but historically and politically unsustainable, Scottish national identity *per se* within mainstream commercial feature films such as *Bonnie Prince Charlie* (1948), *Rob Roy* (1995), *Chasing the Deer* (1994), and innumerable small and silver screen adaptations of Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novel *Kidnapped*.

*Culloden* derives much of its impact as a coruscating corrective to the sentimentality of much popular Jacobite mythology and historiography from the unsparing detail in which the film charts the causes and course of the battle that lies at its heart. Granted, the movie's sympathies clearly lie with the ordinary Highlanders who associate (or, in most cases, who are forcibly associated by others) with the Jacobite cause. *Culloden's* opening shot, for instance, is of Hanoverian troops marching towards camera, thus momentarily placing viewers in the unenviable position of Charles Edward Stuart's hungry, exhausted, ill-equipped and hopelessly outnumbered troops. But on the other hand, the film is also at pains to make clear the fact that the two socio-political systems represented on the battlefield at Culloden Moor were both predicated on principles of systematic and wholesale socio-economic inequality and exploitation. *Culloden's* unseen narrator more than once describes the traditional Highland clan system as "ruthless," a mode of social organisation that reduced most of its adherents to the semi-human status of tradable chattels. He also emphasises at various junctures the intrinsic social complexity and divisiveness of what was, essentially, a pan-British civil war, rather than a military conflict waged between England and Scotland. Despite the frequent popular cultural association of Highland Jacobitism with Scottish national identity, the narrator reminds his audience of the inconvenient historical truth that Prince Charles faced "more Scots in arms against him than for him" when his troops made their last stand at Culloden.

Yet to present *Culloden* solely as a piece of passionate and precise historical revisionism would be to do the film a critical disservice. Nearly fifty years after it was made, and some 270 since the events that it depicts unfolded, Peter Watkins's work still possesses a remarkable degree of contemporary relevance and resonance. This is because *Culloden* frames itself as a movie about, to quote the WWI English poet Wilfred Owen, the pity of war *per se*, as well as that of one war in particular. It is, perhaps, no accident in this regard that the film's running time (69 minutes) exactly matches that of the blood-soaked battle which it records: viewers are thus confronted by the fact that thousands of human lives can be snuffed out in the time that it takes to watch a single television programme. Similarly pointed is the fact that the narrator's final, despairing words ("they have created a desert and called it peace") are drawn from the historian Tacitus's 98AD biography of Agricola. The latter was a Roman general who, like the Hanoverian commander the Duke of Cumberland in 1746,

prosecuted a brutal campaign of colonial subjugation in the northern regions of Scotland. Elsewhere, the recurring visual motif of human faces disfigured by sword and shot recalls the iconic/horrific image of an elderly woman's shattered visage that forms part of the celebrated Odessa Steps sequence of Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), another great film about the brutality of failed revolution and civil war. Finally, we should also note the links that Peter Watkins himself drew between the historical events of the period that his film depicts and those of the period during which that film was made. The director has argued that, "this was the 1960s, and the US army was 'pacifying' the Vietnam highlands. I wanted to draw a parallel between these events and what had happened in our own UK Highlands two centuries earlier." Although *Culloden* is possibly the most intellectually challenging and complex cinematic examination of an especially traumatic and important period within Scottish history, there are many other good reasons for studying Peter Watkins's film than simply that.

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**Reference:** Peter Watkins, '*Culloden*', available @ <http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/culloden.htm>